Life in Illusions

(a novelette)

M.R. GOHAR

Life in Illusions

(a novelette)

By

M.R. Gohar

ORIENTS SOCIAL RESEARCH CONSULTANCY
(OSRC) (SMC-PRIVATE) Ltd.

To

all those who suffered in the air crash……

All rights reserved
by
M. R. Gohar

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stolen
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior
permission of the publisher.

International Standard Book Number (ISBN)
978-969-2281-04-1

Printed in Pakistan by
Haji Haneef & Sons, Band Road, Lahore

Publisher:
Orient Social Research Consultancy (OSRC) (SMC-PRIVATE) Ltd.
263-FF, Street 233, Wafi City, Citi Housing Society, Gujranwala.
Tel: +92-300-9644467 Email: info@osrc.org.pk

Price (PKR): 500.00
Price (US $) : 40

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Mr. Imran Aslam (University of Gujrat, Gujrat), and Mr. Saadat Ali Khan (Government Graduate College Satellite Town Gujranwala) for reviewing the manuscript of *Life in Illusions* and suggesting me valuable changes in its structure. I am also thankful to my spouse and kids (Ayesha Gohar, Fatima Gohar, Ahmad Gohar and Hajra Gohar) who always support and motivate me in my writing. A separate token of thanks to the readers who read and criticise my works.

LIFE IN ILLUSIONS

(a novelette)

M. R. Gohar

Chapter - I

Our practised fingers sometimes slime into some unpracticed mulch and are followed by gumminess and stickiness only.

Hi Mr. Thinker!

These are the words that meet my gaze when I click on the identity marked *Jennica* in my inbox. It is the 25th of December and I am quite free but somewhat indolent in the early part of the night. Indolence is natural, I think, at the moments when one is all alone in the winter nights. The aroma of the hot milk from the mug at my side table is the only moving thing in my room that seems dancing at the rhythmic and monotonic tick tick of the clock's hands. The movement of the clock's hands is circular while that of the aroma is of spiral as well as upright like a *sufi* in *wajdaan* at *Bulleh Shah's kafi.* I look at the still image of the spring trees on the front wall. Another scenery, of a tree with

yellow leaves, is hanging oblique on the right wall in the middle. The tick tick of the clock is just like the flow of months and years perhaps. The things seem constant only on the scenery on the wall, or on the blank sheet of memory. Both are quiet and naked at the moment. The spring days drag me back to my bygone youth and the yellow leaves escalate a sense of old age in the coming years. The night of December is getting more and more intensified with the increase of chill on my hands. The day i.e. 25th of December is the reminiscent of the birth of the founder of our homeland. At the same time the celebrations of Christmas are going to double the sense of merriment; downplaying and muffling the grief of the yellowness for the time being.

I sip half of the mug of milk as my fingers keep on clicking the keys on the keyboard of my laptop. It is mid night and in the Punjab, at that time people mostly escape into the warm and cozy quilts. There is silence outside and inside the room except the rhythmic but clear paddling of the clock's hands. I am trying to balance the temperature of my body sometimes by rubbing my palms and sometimes by having sips of the hot milk. But the last three sips from my mug are unable to make me warm anymore as the milk has lost its hotness. The coverlet woven by my late mother's hand is the only thing that serves the purpose of keeping me warm. It is perhaps more the warmth of her hands and heart than the quilt itself. Ah! My late mother is no more with me yet the memories of hers around me rarely leave me alone. Every sudden sigh with a look at her precious leftovers is how I feel her presence even after fifteen years of her death.

I select many unread mails and delete them with a single click as most of them are from advertising engines and

Sufi: a saint, **Wajdan**: trance, **Bulleh Shah**: A sufi poet, **Kafi**: a lyrical song

some others from auto-generated archives. Anyhow, the name *Jennica* is for the first time I happen to see there.

Hi Mr. Thinker!" is the title of the email.

My gaze gets fixed on the words, and I struggle to presuppose the possible contents in that mail. I have no idea since when I am turning so sensitive to the uncommon things. It is perhaps the flow of the years like the clock hands or like the change of seasons that is kicking me off the zone of carefree mood of adolescence. Sensitivity sometimes becomes more a bane than a boon as it rarely lets one's mind be vacant. My mind is getting crowded with ideas like the inboxes of my email and my cell-phone; and it is quite contrary to my youth days where nothing used to stay long in my memory. My mother often used to taunt me for my forgetting of even the important chores she used to assign me.

Anyhow, *Jennica* is the name I am seeing for the first time. The interjection *hi* is not indigenous and local. Addressing me as *Mr. Thinker* adds more curiosity because nobody calls me by that name in my surroundings. I touch my mouse pad to read the full length of the text of email which lies as;

Hi Mr. Thinker!

Me Jennica David here. I'm a student of anthropology. I happened to see your email in my junk box. I was about to delete it but the word 'thinker' appeared ridiculous as well as serious at the same time. Me curious, if anything lies in a name? or it's just a way to show off. I tried to explore your profile but nothing I could get except your date of birth. Your name seems to be a South Asian. Me say sorry for any inconvenience if you felt by my text.

(Jennica)

The Cathedral of Learning
Pitts. PA, USA.

The moment I finish the text, I try to rub my catnapping eyes and try to muster up my scattered senses. The words in the email are, no doubt, tantalizing and implicative at the same time They increase the chill around me. I rub my hands many times to shake the nippiness that has just surrounded me. The sense of drowsiness that I was expecting to overpower me a little earlier vanishes all of a sudden, and despite a tranquil outside, a spark of refulgence glimmers inside me. I gather courage for replying the text at the same time but my rehearsal of re-reading of so many years at university during my research degree nurtured in me a habit of having the review of everything that looks important and curious. My father, especially in exam days, used to advise me to spare some moments at the end of each paper to review the material written as answers. That habit is now my second nature. If I am not dishonest, Jennica's email stirs in me the same academic behaviour I exercised during my academic years.

During my second reading of *Jennica's* email, the word 'anthropology' appears me uncommon. This discipline suggests a lot in me about her. For the first time in my life I am going to realize that names have some significance. The names which our parents suggest for us in our infancy hardly matter in larger perspectives. But the names we select for ourselves seem corresponding with our bearing. In our infancy, the names reflect the ideologies of our elders. Through our names, they seem to resurrect the values of their grandparents or holy ancestors, or they build their own dreams perhaps, but in our maturity, whatever the ideals we find, we try to incorporate with them by

inventing identities with their patterns of life and living. Perhaps we take a shift from the idealism of our elders to the idealism we construct for ourselves. Mostly both the entrepreneurs turn out to be illusions; I think and laugh inside.

In *Jennica's* email, her direct dissent is on my adopted name which I need to justify in some way or the other. In my opinion the 'name' itself is not so much the cause of objection as is the one who cloaks oneself in that; the defence of 'name' is indirectly or directly the defence of one's existence.

I do not know when my conscious part goes into sleep and the unconscious self starts showing its own mechanism in the form of *Jennica's* rosy face, straw-coloured hair and sparkling teeth. Such surrealism is in general when one is young and unmarried especially living in the country like Pakistan where everything that has even the remotest link with foreign attracts like a magnet. From such formal way of dreaming I am not an exception.

The day is 26th December; the very next day of *Jennica's* email. The evening is a little bit more chilly and foggy. Soon there will be a pitch dark. During my drive back home, I keep on thinking of the possible words for replying *Jennica's* electronic mail. Time and again in my routine work, even during the whole day, her email kept on opening in the inbox of my mind. Sometimes, the words came like the sunbeams to comfort me on December days, but some other times, they fell like the drops of rain, soaking my shivering body and intensifying the chill.

I reach home, take my dinner in haste, and manage the other things abruptly. Like the previous night, I have a mug of hot milk on my side table and my laptop in front of me. I

pull the coverlet over my legs, cover my shoulders with a *chadar* and rest my back against the crown of the bed. I switch on the system, open my i.d and click on *Jennica's* email. I read it again and press 'reply' button from options. A blank page displays. My fingers start moving on the key board saying,

Hi Jennica!

I'm thinker here. From ***Pakistan;*** *a state that won her freedom from British* ***colonialism*** *in 1947. A* ***Muslim****. An English lecturer by profession. Hobby is reading books on history, religion and literature. 'Thinker' is my nick name, my college fellows used to call me in the early years of my job as a college teacher. It was an appreciation, or may be an irony, I don't know exactly. The identity 'thinker' was actually generated by one of my friends in the days when I had the least access to the world of internet. He selected that lexical item for my email address either by jest or in any other sense, I know not. Since those days it has been going on unchanged, and I own it now.*

Wishing you a good night!

....Thinker...

Before sending it, I read it again and save *Jennica's* name as *Jennica* as her first name and *anthropologist* as her surname in my contact list.

The room temperature is falling as the days are moving towards the peak of winter, and here in Punjab, winter is always intense like its counterpart, the summer; both seem challenging to each other, both fascists and extremists, both affecting the same on the mood and temperament of the people. Anyhow, in the days of winter, electricity outages

Chadar: shawl

are few and far between, while in the days of summer, they are most frequent.

I pull the coverlet over my head and slip into it to have a warm sleep. *Jennica's* words and the words written by me in reply start appearing in my tranquil head. They are the best ones I can use to reply her, I think. They seem to me standing face to face like two rivals in a wrestling. Sometimes, they appear to me as twined and interlocked like the yellow *amarbel* on some naked *kikar* tree.

Amarbel: a tree, **Kikar**: a tree

Chapter - II

Words bear ideas, and ideas are rooted deep into cultures; sometimes the clash of words turns out to be the clash of cultures.

It is the 27th December. The days are getting shorter. Even in the morning the sun rises at 10 and sometimes at 11. The other extreme of the day is also so sudden and quick. Even with the afternoon prayers, the shadows of the darkness start lurking on the houses, and before twilight the automobiles switch on the head and fog lights. January is approaching with snow-fall on the mountains. Sometimes, even in the central Punjab, the rains accompany snow and turn everything white and glowing. The educational institutions freeze academic activities because of the winter cum Christmas holidays.

In my adjacent bazaar there is a small catholic church surrounded by the Christian houses. Now a days, a great

festivity and jubilation is visible in the particular bazaar. To the east of that, there is a landscape of ten acres having trees in abundance. The fog on the grass that is grown on the walking track amid the cultivated fields is always refreshing and embalming. In the summer days, particularly, a long walk with bare-feet transforms a cooling effect from the palms of the feet to the skull of the head. Sitting for a long time, with feet dipped in the clear water of the brooklet is romantic. The chirping of the birds in their own chorus is always spiritual to me. In the mornings I often spend almost an hour there. Church bells and the sound of the hymns, though unable to be fully comprehended by me, give a sense of realization that the Christians too have their freedom in performing their religious offerings and rituals. Though the people of that area belong to the under privileged class and in my school days most of them were sanitary workers; some boys and girls had their matriculation and got reasonable jobs, few of them went for graduation and masters and got white-collar jobs. *Latif Bhatti*, one of my class fellows, joined DCO office as a junior clerk. His cousin *Mushtaq Bhatti* went for dental laboratory certification. He has now his own dental clinic on the main road. They have improved their social status a lot. The shining new tiles of the church floor and a big golden cross on the front wall of the church are the proofs of their progress. Last year, during the election campaign, the *Nazim* of the town visited the church and donated a new air conditioner of PEL company and ten new fans of *Rasheed Sons.* On that day, the church warden Mr. *Roffin Bhatti* and the other community members were very thankful to the Muslim community.

In the noon, two of my college colleagues visit me and offer me to have a tour to the *Murree Hills*. They have a plan to stay for four days, but I feel unable to manage such a long stay and make an excuse. Anyhow, I say them

Nazim: a political leader of an area

thanks and bless them with my best wishes. After they part, I do not know, from where comes *Jennica* in my conscious stream of thinking. All of a sudden, I feel a sense of discourtesy in me. The Christmas is going on in America in full swing and I should say *Happy Christmas* to *Jennica,* I think. I should have done so, at least, as a matter of formality. She deserves it from me either I have only one time exchange of email or many times. Greeting *Happy Christmas* is now more a social concern than a ritual. I take my formal lunch and go into my study. I go straight to my inbox. There are thirty new emails. At the 27th number there is *Jennica's,* starting with the words.

Hi Dear thinker!

I received your text. I perused it twice. Thanks for sending me details about you. Your interests in history and religion are really remarkable. These areas are the part of my discipline i.e. social anthropology. I'm from the Cathedral of Learning Pitts PA. My mother had special interest in the history of Orientals. My father Mr. David was a lawyer but his research was in the comparative study of religions. My grandfather had once been the attorney at Lahore before 1947. In 1947, he came back to England. In 1948, my grand parents settled here in America. At that time my father was in his early youth. My grandfather had a good taste in reading literary books. All of his books are now in my hands. My father and mother got expired in a road accident five years back. My brother, Jespersen is the only sibling I have. He runs his own business in Michigan.

In your email, highlighted words 'Pakistan' and 'colonialism' flash so many implications in my mind. British colonialism, and then the freedom that you people won seem really parabolic as well as paradoxical. To me the things are not as you see. It's right that your country

engraved its name on the map of the world and defined its territorial boundaries, but winning of freedom by you is somewhat debatable for me. The creation of Pakistan seems to me a result of historical phenomenon, but its freedom and liberty still seem in limbo. Its creation in 1947, sharply after the end of the 2nd world war, seems to me a by-product of two consecutive world wars. Its birth through the partition of the sub-continent is like a premature delivery in the gynecological sense. If you call it a freedom from the geographical point of view, you're right.

The second highlight 'colonialism' is also very particular. You have been the ex-colony of the British Empire, no doubt, but you people perhaps don't differentiate colonialism from imperialism.

The third highlight 'Muslim' seems to convey a lot from you. You seem to imply that Pakistan and Islam are deeply rooted, but the official name of your state 'Islamic republic of Pakistan' means not the exact what you believe. I feel repugnance for yoking of such romantically dissimilar items. According to my information, being Islamic means something else and being republic means something other. This vast fluff presents its manifestations through your legislative, economic and social spheres of life. I get wonder struck when I think about such disparities in your systems. It's no less than some divine miracle that you are surviving.

I just want to apologize if my ideas hurt and breach your ideologies, but for me it is a ground reality. I'll appreciate you if you reply me with a text to redress my views.

With best wishes

(Jennnica)

This time I read the email with unusual caution and even at every full stop I take a pause. I feel my hand in a beehive, dreaming of honey, but the hum of the bees welcomes me instead. I am awakening from a nightmare, but its looming shadows still seem to haunt me. I am unable to re-read the text. Its reading for once shakes my inner state of being to such an extent that its reading for second time may disjoint my ribs. The content in the Jennica's email is a dierect hit on my myths of survival. One may digest something bitter against one's personal drawbacks, but it hard becomes to digest when a dent is made on one's social and cultural myths.

Anyhow, the addition of greeting tag '*dear'* instead of *Mr.* and the complimentary close of the email '*with best wishes'* are not formal. They seem balms on the recently scratched wounds. I struggle to recompose myself. I move my head back, close my eyes and for a long time remain in a fixed posture. Though outwardly stagnant, a torrent of ideas is throbbing my mind and heart. All the chill outside insinuates into my back bone. Before tapping on the 'reply' option, I open *Jennica's* profile where she appears as *Jennica* the first name and "*David* " the second one. *Age 26 years, Pittsburg, PA. Interest in books reading on art, culture, religion and history.* I come to the reply option and my fingers start typing words on the screen.

Dear Jennica!

Many many happy returns of Christmas. I hope it will bring better days for you. I also pray for the parted souls of your parents and grand parents.

I received your email, read it carefully. All of your ideas are negotiable. We had once been the colony of the British; it's right, but how can you say that we can't differentiate

colonialism from imperialism. What is gonna happen, right now with us by you people, is an outright imperialism, and what was in our past was simply a stubborn colonialism. We matured our separation after a long movement of struggle. The time of our coming into being was the particular postwar era, but it was not the British leniency; our destiny. We won freedom under the slogan of a sovereign Islamic state with a desire to have Islamic civilization in our roots. We coined its name as per Islamic ideology. Islam is a civilization, and it outlines basic principles in almost all spheres of life. To whatever extent we are derailed, Islam remains in the bones of our civic and social life. We have our history, culture and values. We are never ashamed of our meritorious past. Though our people are going to be commercialized, their topmost priority is still their value system. We are always qualitative in our approach. We prefer values to commodities and people.

What about the USA? The United States of America was a colony of Great Britain. The 13 American colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, becoming the first states of the United States. We got our freedom politically or historically, but your creation was purely on economic grounds. You are nations and not a nation. You can't claim to be a civilization. You have never been able to nurture a shared value system. To be more simple, you've no culture, that is your culture. Your framework is designed just for the sake of commodities. Your genetic traits come through as many routes as you have stars on your flag. Your identity has never been clear to you even. You put commodities at the top and values at the bottom most. Your approach is always quantitative. You can scarify values and masses, and you can do that for the sake of commodities.

Your dream of becoming a super power can be justified in your own rights, but I strongly fear that such a state with numerical and calculative approach will not mould ideologically-oriented civilizations into her own parameters.

Christianity is your official religion, and Bible is your documentary scripture. Church is there to get you gathered on Sundays. Whenever, at some stage of your commercialization, you felt that you were unable to practise it as a religion you delimited it to church only. Christianity is at your mercy. You feel elated for being the citizens of the United States, no doubt. You claim to be the champions of human rights; failing to prove that, alas! There are fundamental differences between your side and mine side. Seen from one lens, the things seem queer and awkward on the other side. How can we understand someone's parables while standing on another position? Things seem paradoxical, no doubt.

We are a republic and at the same time Islamic, but we always manage and reschedule the ingredients of the republic under the frames and parameters of Islam. We rarely let the ideas of the republic jeopardize the basic infrastructure of Islam. You have rightly called it a divine miracle.

In the end, I say sorry for any discourtesy you feel from my side. Hope you will think over the matter without any colored glasses.

....Thinker....

I send the email without having a second glance over the text and feel much relief. I think *Jennica* will not dare to write me again. The things written to her are too much to

be digested by her. I close my eyes and rest my head on my closed fists. *Jennica* is in front of me. Both standing and fixed; I am under a palm tree; the only green mass around. She is under the starching sun. The rest of the desert is level plain and almost colourless; no oasis around. I move my glance all around, and find only a vast stretched sand with zigzag patterns of *hamadas* and *canyons*. No trees, no shade, just some s*uaeda, capparis* and *calligonum*. There are some naked headed vultures cruising far away; the carcass of some animal may be there. My lips are thirsty but still wet. Though bare footed I'm, the burn of the sand is not severe. This time *Jennica* seems haggard. She looks outwardly serene, but inwardly, I feel, facing silent blows and thrashes of some scythe. She struggles to move but can't. She seems helpless. But, at my place, I am helpless too, fixed and pierced, feeling my body unable to move.

Such things are quite strange for me as my habit of day dreaming is rare. But the vision of vast spread desert is recurring. I am unable to comprehend the implications of that dream. I try to shun it from my skull and go into sleep. It is 5.00 in the morning when the prayer call from a nearby *masjid* makes me awake. The *moazzan* is proclaiming *'awaking is far better than sleeping'.* The scene of the desert, *Jennica's* look and the palm tree vanished from my eyes. Just one idea that lurks in my mind is how to get out of the warm bed, make *wuzu* and say the *fajar* prayer. In winter the day's first prayer seems the hardest task. I always try to make it my habit to say the fajar prayer in a masjid in time. Sometimes, I try to convince myself that *prayer* is more a sense of submission than a habit. A habit is when we are predictable in our actions but in a prayer every time we are with new revelations. Habits reveal our physical existence but prayers manifest our metaphysical existence.

Hamadas and canyons: desert shrubs, **masjid**: mosque, **moazzan**: The one who calls for prayer, **wuzu**: ablution, **fajar prayer**: morning prayer

Chapter - III

It takes time and energy to inflate a balloon but its pricking is sudden. Ideas carry on inflating one like a balloon but a single prick deflates them all.

During the morning walk, I am again in the small forest near the churchyard. There is less hustle and bustle, and the decorative bulbs are no more. A soft voice of organ is resounding around and someone is singing hymns in the loud speaker but in a low tone. From the other side, an announcement of the demise of an old woman is going on from the mosque *Jamia Ghousia*. The *imam masjid Qari Feroz Deen* is informing the people about her funeral time. His last words, *verily we are from Allah and we have to return to Him*, are very emphatic. For a moment the fear of death shudders me but the next moment it is over, and I glance at the golden *Cross* fixed at the front door of the church. There is also written a verse on the wall saying, *for to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded*

Imam masjid: Head of the mosque

is life and peace (Romans 8:6). Once again the concept of death lurks in me but the idea of life after death in the second clause of the sentence leaves on my mind an impression of eternity. Unconsciously, a strange query runs in my mind, "Where can be God right now"? The voices from the loud speakers of the both church and masjid have the same amplifiers and resonance. One God in two buildings? Half in Church and perhaps half in mosque, or Omnipresent! From the same God, so diverse manifestations and so diverse axioms? Such diverse fantasies for the same God make people invent myths, I think. These myths give birth to ideologies; and ideologies lead to wars and battles. With a sudden splash, there comes *Jennica,* a Christian, and I, a Muslim. She is a female, I am a male. She is a white, and I am a brown. She is an American, and I am a Pakistani. Both ardent; both true in their own rights. Both wrong from each other's perspective. A mosque and a church in the same premises. Two discrete blocks on the same globe. Two similar but not identical genders in the same humanity; *Jennica* and I.

The parallel waves are working. I walk on and come home. It is the time I am expecting some students who would come to collect some books and discuss some issues on current affairs. They reach at the given time. We set our chairs in the sun, have cups of hot milk served by the maid, and for a long time, we discuss the political affairs of our country. They tell me that they are appearing for the coming attempt of *Central Superior Services Examinations*. I suggest them some books to consult for English Grammar and composition. They ask me about essay writing for which I ask them to come some other day. I wish them good luck and let them go.

There is no response from *Jennica* and I also feel no particular need to write her. Perhaps my words of the text

are too pungent to be digested by her. The winter, this year, seems to be in its full bloom. Most of the people around are heard complaining of cough, flue and cold. There is so much rush on pharmacies. Even a practitioner in my locality told me yesternight secretly that he was thinking of having a new Honda 125 as his old bike was below his status. The only medical cum utility store of the area has flourished so much that the owner of the shop has employed a young girl as a helper. He has his visiting cards printed having his whereabouts, and a sign board is gleaming, with lights inside, on the front part of his shop. The winter for him is worth fortune and he is highly grateful to Allah. During the last *Juma* prayer *Qari Ferooz Deen* especially prayed to Allah with his utmost devotion for a bountiful rain and for the health of the ailing people.

It is the 4th of January and the evening lights are soon switched on. These lights in the shades of the houses are gloomily brightening the streets. I go to my *dera* from where I bring milk of buffaloes. My uncle *Umer Deen* advises me, as usual, to take two glasses of hot milk with pure honey every night, and have some woolen *chadar* around. He thinks pant shirt and coat are insufficient to tackle the winter. He alarms me, as he does every year, that the winter, this year will be more severe and rains will be late. He also forbids me to wander out in the wintry nights. He also secretly thrusts into the pocket of my coat two small packets of almonds and asks me to eat seven *badams* daily in the morning. It is his myth that only almonds are far sufficient to sharpen my memory. I don't resist and take them with thanks. I don't try to resist his myths and gifts. Whenever my aunt gives me some edibles, my uncle tries to surpass her.

I follow my uncle *Umer Deen's* advice, but to the extent of one glass of hot milk without honey.The pure honey jar

Juma prayer: Friday prayer, **Dera**: farmhouse, **Badams**: almonds

which my uncle gifted me a week back is no more with me. I gave it to my friend *Fareed Ali* who is much fond of such *desi* and domestic food items. In winter, g*ajrela* and *saag* are his craze which I often provide him especially on weekends. At about 10:00 pm I open my i.d as a routine matter. There are ten new entries marked with the date 4th January, with a *Jennica's* email also. Within me there is a sudden aura of excitement whose nature I am unable to define. The text follows;

Hi dear thinker!

Sorry for not writing you earlier. A bundle of thanks for the well wishes for me and my family. You know here the Christmas celebrations are going on in full swing. For two days I visited my class fellows. My brother Jespersen accompanied me to a night-club where I enjoyed the least. Anyhow, the most thrilling time I spent was with my new friend Fizza who has recently joined my department, three weeks back I think. She is a Pakistani, and from Karachi. She met me a few days after her arrival. She has a language barrier. Though she is much junior to me, I feel pleasure in helping her in resolving her problem. During Christmas holidays, we spent most of the time together. I enjoyed her company. I never feel comfortable with my female fellows, but with Fizza I feel contrary. I shared with her a lot about my state, university and even the culture. She too wishes to share many things but lack of confidence hinders her. She is a bit shy and hesitant; but hope to improve soon. She has so many photographs of her city, photographs of her cousin's marriage, her dresses, and so many other cultural memories with her. I hope to know a lot from her regarding your culture and ways of living.

The text you sent is so much revealing to me. The ideas and views regarding your identity were least in my

Gajrela: a dish made from carrots and milk, **Saag**: a punjabi dish

knowledge. You know whole of the literary legacy of my grandfather and father was transferred to me. My training under my grandfather and my father let me groom in the way I am. The collection of books which I inherited, help me to read about Eastern culture. What I know about the sub-continent is that fundamentalism, extremism and male chauvinism are all the time rampant characteristics. Almost all the texts here in my private library and in the library of my department manifest the similar findings. One thing more to add here is that the books are written not by ordinary authors; they are the creations of the worthy intellectuals of that era.

My talks with Fizza and the text of your previous email are gonna confuse me. I am in a fix. The set patterns and the tapestry about you people in my mind have entangled. It is quite unusual. The sense of pride in my bearings has started to slacken which seems intolerable to me in any way. It's difficult for me to disbelieve the books I've been reading for years, but on the other hand I can't even negate your ideas absolutely. I feel myself standing at a crossroad. I need more study and more learning about the diverse realities. The books in my library seem laughing at me and I dare not touch them now-a-days. Fizza often notices me lost somewhere and shakes my arm gently to bring me back. Dear thinker! would you explain me something further about your myth of existence?

All the best.

….Jennica ...

The whole text of the mail is in front of my eyes but the compliment *'all the best'* seems to me something particular. Secondly, the name Jennica with dots and without brackets on both sides is not usual. Jennica is again

in a desert but the swirls of sand around her are no more. She seems exhausted; exhausted out of her fight against the onrush and unwanted thrashes of the sand particles. The particles, though small and tiny in size, are spiky and thorny in their bites. I am too in the same desert striding to and fro; waiting restlessly for something to happen. The desert vultures are sitting peacefully on a dry tree trunk. They are waiting for some new dead body perhaps. The thorny bushes and colourless herbs are like some still picture. They transcend from change of weather and clime. Even the rains don't change their color and size.

The vision vanishes with the knock at my door. It is our maid who has come to inform me that my aunt *Zuhra* has sent me cheese. I thank her and ask her to go to sleep. My aunt *Zuhra i*s a lady of her own nature. She belongs to a rich and landlord family of the nearby town. Her father is a *nazim* of the area. She studied a few classes but is an expert in home management. My uncle Umer Deen is a matric pass. They are living a peaceful life except little skirmishes which arise whenever my uncle mentions some corruption scandals against her father and brother. I know well that my uncle does so to tease her, but she gets reactionary. My cousin *Javaid i*s in his seventh class and the eldest daughter *Saima* is in her fourth year at *Government College for Women*. Sometimes she visits me to borrow some books and notes, and at others to consult about some speech competition or quiz. She is a mediocre in her studies, yet much active in co-curricular activities. She is never frank with me and I too never ask anything irrelevant and personal. The other two cousins, at the bottom, *Raheel* and *Zubia* are very frank with me. Whenever they are free, they visit my home. *Raheel* has more attachment with me than *Zubia.* After my mother's and father's deaths, they are the inspiration of survival for me. I visit my uncle's house, two streets away, but on rare

occasions. They know well about my shyness and they force me never against that. With my uncle I, sometimes, have little jokes which he enjoys much.

My uncle often dictates me letters for his friends at Mir Pur, Azad Kashmir. I ask him to send them emails, and he smiles and asks me that he likes to have his words in the hands of his friends so that they may know how much I love and miss them. "Can an email do that?" I smile in response with no answer and start writing. I have to write with lead pencil first and then to write in black ink as a final draft. This thing I know very well why my uncle wishes so. He has his own logic which I never try to contradict. His excitement is worth seeing when he gets replies from his friends but he does not show me those replies; just informs me whose reply has come. Whenever the postman brings a letter, he offers him *lassi* and butter, and some amount in cash too. He takes special care of my uncle's *daak.* If he is not at home, he chases him and delivers him in person though he has to go to his *dera*. There he also finds time to have a little chat on local politics, load shedding, terrorism and economic crisis. The scandalous news about aunt's father and brother are also secretly delivered to my uncle by him.

Anyhow, I believe in emails. Posting letters is classical and sending electronic mails is modern. Laptop, a modern instrument, is in front of me and I start writing email as it is too late in the night.

Dear Jennica!

I'm neither a thinker nor a philosopher in the true sense of the words. As far as my academic career is concerned, I have never been so much brilliant. I belong to a middle class peasantry. Life is going on well in the natural

Lassi: butter milk, **Daak**: post, mail

surroundings. As a whole the colors of Islamic culture are dominant here on my family and on the folk around me. Before the colonial experience we were even simpler. Since then my people underwent the drastic changes. Issues got on becoming knotty and complex. Western influence of language and life started permeating in our minds and moods. Some called it a modernization, and others claimed it an enlightenment. The whole equilibrium and balance of our social life got disturbed. Apart from that, the writers from the other side created narratives to portray us as barbarians and ruffians. Novelists, with their vested interests in particular, distorted our image. A grave error on our part occurred was that instead of writing back to them, we started accepting such paraphernalia, partially or fully; a fictional phenomenon. We are not what we are pronounced by the westerns. Our actual existence is quite contrary to your fictional hyperboles. Our identity, which you people know at present, is what reached you through narrations and orations of the colonizers.

So far as your library is concerned, I'm not sure what sort of books there are. But one thing I can presume is that they have been produced by western scholars. They are justified if seen from their perspective. They present us as Others; attributing with us all the cultural and historical sins. They claim to own all the cultural and historical virtues and perfections. They contextualize us as they wish. Our existence at a fictional level was kept on printing on your minds, as is the phenomenon with you in particular. You think we are racially and religiously prejudiced; hence, take us as a paranoid community. Through such disparity you try to invent a justification to dominate us, to control us and to exploit us. We have been taken to the psychosomatic stage of illness, where we have to live and survive for an unpredictable time span.

I don't wish to disturb you anymore but just let you expose to the spaces; how they are created, and how they carry on widening. Things seem perfect and ideal as long as they are not seen with their contrasts. Similarities start appearing when two discrete phenomena are observed from fundamental levels. I just share these ideas with you so that I may search apparent contrasts and fundamental similarities. I hope you're smart enough in responding me properly.

Wishing you good luck.

…Thinker…

I make a bird's eye view of the whole text again, click the send option and take a long breath in. It is 2:00 am on the clock, and there is dead silence all around. Sometimes a dog's bark breaks the spell of the night but overall nothing is audible or visible in such a dark mood of the early dawn. I propose myself to go to sleep, put my electronic instrument aside, switch on zero watt bulb and off the tube light with the same click. *Jennica* comes across in oriental dress and in occidental hair style; a light blue *shalwar qameez* with a short *dupatta in maroon* around her neck and light straw-coloured hair, all opened and moving gently with the air. She is striding with a side-pose to me. I stand still and look at her but she keeps on going without any turn to me.

Shalwar Kameez: Eastern dress

Chapter - IV

One is perfect when one is blind to one's imperfections. One is perfect even when one airs oneself to be perfect. Perfection, quite contrarily, is the realization of one's imperfections.

It is the mid of January. The days are particular in the sense that a rib-touching wind is blowing. I return late from my college for a farewell function of BS English, and instead of going home, I go to the *dera* first in order to collect milk. I reach there and find my uncle busy in squeezing milk from his favourite buffalo *Lajjo*; a name given by him to the buffalo with love. He packs milk in two same-sized bottles; one to be given to the aunt and the other to be carried to my home. He also pours raw milk in a big glass for me to be drunk instantly. I do not want to take at that time, yet I can not resist too; this thing he knows well too. I drink all and wipe my lips looking at him with a smile. It was years back, perhaps, after my matriculation

exams, he taught me stripping method; how to milk a buffalo manually. He used to teach how to wash teats with clean water. First one or two streams of milk from each teat should be thrown out of the bucket. To have maximize milk letdown, milking should start with a 60 to 90 seconds massage on the teats with both hands. He sat with me and asked me to try with hands by putting thumb and first finger as high up as possible on the udder, trap the milk with those fingers and then squeeze the remaining fingers to continue. It used to be fun for me in those days to milk a buffalo with some showers of raw milk directly in my open mouth. I got expertise in that in a week or so. I am not a regular squeezer but whenever my uncle is away and the servants are not available, I have to manage the milking process.

Today he seems somewhat excited when he advises me to go home directly without staying anywhere on the way. I ensure him to be so. He informs me that it will be rain at night. His predictions about weather are always true. On my asking he once told me that buffaloes, cows and lambs are the best indicators to predict weather. They start feeling uncomfortable before any sudden change in ecosystem.

It is time after *magrib prayer.* The people are hurrying back to their lairs as a light shower is expected tonight. There is an unusual rush on the stalls of dry fruit, fried fish and *barbecue*. The stall of peanut in front of church by *Allah Ditta* is much crowded. He, with his two sons, is roasting peanut and seems excited. This year he will have a good sale and profit. He was once the school fellow of my uncle *Umer Deen* for which he always gives me a special discount on each purchase. How much busy he may be, he never forgets to send *salaam* to my uncle which I convey to him with a same message in response.

Magrib: Evening prayer, **Salaam**: Greetings

This evening when I reach near home I see my maid *SugraN Apa* standing in front of the utility store with two big shoppers in her hand. I presume these shoppers are for my neighbouring aunt. She often sends my maid for some purchase whenever some guests visit her. But when I enter home I see my *phupho Sakeena* with *phupha Nabi Ahmed*. There are also my *khala RasheedaN* and *khalu Shabbir.* All are seated in *charpais* in the main hall. There is a warm exchange of love and affection. Here are bananas, *fruiters*, *musami* and apples; four shopping bags on the side table. I am really surprised to see them all at the same time. My *phupho* lives in Faisalabad and my *khala* is from *Jehlum*. Both of them have their agricultural lands. Their sudden arrival in such busy days of wheat crop is really an indication of something more important and more serious. Anyhow, I can not dare to ask anything regarding their arrival. I express my excitement by asking about my cousins, their studies and many other things. Since my mother's death which followed the death of my father with a gap of six months, it is the first time, they all have come together. Now I realize why the maid has had two shopping bags in the kitchen. She is busy in the kitchen in preparing dinner with the help of my cousin *Zubia.*

All of them share the memories of my father and mother and feel sad at their absence. They console me, encourage me and advise me many things for coming days. My *khalu* asks me about my job and college routine. Meanwhile the dinner is ready; the table is set in an informal way. We start and continue our talks about different relatives. *Zubia* is preparing beds for them in the main room. We all go there and sit in cozy quilts; the quilts were woven by my mother's hands. I always inhale a unique scent from these quilts. Mostly they are stored in *petti and trunk* of my mother's dowry, but whenever some special guests arrive,

Phupha: Paternal uncle, **Phuphi**: Paternal aunt, **Khala**: Maternal aunt, **Khalu**: Maternal uncle
Charpais: Cots, **Fruiters**: a sort of oranges, **Musami**: a sort of organges

they are drawn, and after use, are stored back with same careful folding.

After some time, we are served with mugs of hot milk with peanut, *kaju* and *akhrot*. The maid servant also prepares *hukka* for my *phupha* and *khalu* for which they are fond of. I sit in my *phuphu's* coverlet with my *chadar* on my shoulders. She asks about my breakfast, lunch and dinner, about my friend *Fareed Ali* and his mother. She again recollects the memories of my late mother and a sense of gloominess overcasts for some time. It is at that time my *khala* beckons *SugraN Apa* and asks her to drop *Zubia* to her home, lock the doors carefully and go for a sleep in her quarters on the first floor. She goes away and my aunt starts:

" Dear son! We have come for a special purpose here. You know you are in your mature years and your job is there too. There should be someone to take care of you, this home and other affairs. After your parents it's our duty to get you realise it."

My *phupha* speaks after clearing his throat and shifting the *hukka* pipe to *khalu: "*Son! We think it's the time you should get marry and settle your home. We wish you have a happy family life. We know that you are in great shock and grief but these are natural shocks. Every living being has to die. It is all in the hands of Allah and we are helpless against His decree. Life goes on in its own way. Sorrows come after happiness, and happiness always comes after sorrows. It is a system made by Allah."

I listen to it with silence with occasional move of my head up and down. My *Khalu* takes the turn: "We think these days it has become really very tough to find suitable and sensible matches from unknown families. God knows how

Petti: storage box, **Akhrot**: walnut, **Kaju**: cashew, **Hukka**: a smoking pipe

a new comer will behave with us. That's why with your due consent, we desire your cousin *Saima* to be your wife. We all know her well. She has grown up in our hands and in front of our eyes. You also know her well. In this way your uncle U*mer Deen* and aunt *Zuhra* will be linked with us in another inseparable bond. *Saima* is about to complete her graduation, and after that we wish you get married with her."

It is my *phupho* who interrupts and says that they should give me the chance to speak something about his choice, if any. After that all get mum. I feel myself a rider coming back from a journey of long miles and now someone is asking me to undertake another adventure without any stay. I clear my throat, engulf the last draught of milk from my mug and speak with reverence.

"I'm highly grateful to you all for wishing me prosperous and happy life, but I did not think on that till now. I know you are my well wishers and your decisions are worthy to respect. It's just the start of my job and I wish to go for higher studies somewhere abroad. I'm not sure how long I'll stay there. *Saima*, too, is still studying. We have sufficient time to decide it with your consent."

"Who stops you doing a job and going abroad. Just say "yes" get married, shift the control of your domestic affairs to your wife and study as much as you wish." My *Khala RasheedaN* tries to conclude.

I know my job and my study abroad are two illogical syllogisms which my *khala* concludes so simply. I think of deferring the topic by requesting them to ask uncle *Umer Deen* and aunt Zuhra first but the idea seems out of place. They are there with me after the due consultation with uncle *Umer Deen* and aunt *Zuhra*. When I find no way to

escape, I humbly request them to give me sometime to think over the matter. “I hope you will not mind it as you’re the most worthy ones for me. I’ll inform you very soon.”

It is my *phupho* who seconds me. She puts my head gently in her lap, moves her fingers through my hair and kisses my hand. She announces the final verdict. “My nephew is so sensible and educated one. He can decide what is right and what is wrong for him. Let him think over it for some time. *Samia* is still immature. We have no hurry. Just let him think and give his consent.” All agree on this logic.

With these words, the topic of my marriage closes. At that moment our maid *SugraN Apa* comes hurriedly and alarms that rain has started outside. She advises me park my car in the shade. I go out. In the dark night when it thunders, the whole surrounding is brightened for a moment, then a blanket of darkness spreads. I park my car in shade. All of a sudden a spark floats from the nearby transformer resulting electricity break down. No lights on. I switch-on my cellphone light, come into the hall and manage to burn the gas lamp. My k*halu* and *phupha* are snorting and the *hukka* is dozing too. My *phophu and khala* are still speaking in low tune. I too slide into my bed and feign to sleep. After a struggle of half an hour I am still unable to sleep. My eyes are closed, yet the rest of the senses are active. With soft steps I come out again in balcony. The electric power is restored. In the tube light of the compound I see the rain drops falling on the ground making bubbles. It was my *dadi amma* who used to tell me that the rain that falls in that manner continues for days. In my early childhood once I asked my *dadi amma,* “from where the rain water comes”. She narrated me when the angels in the high-up skies take a bath, the water falls on the earth. I also used to ask her why the angels take a bath so late in some months of the year, and in other months they take a bath

daily. She used to pat me and called me naughty. How innocent the childhood used to be. In wintry nights in the lap of *daddi* amma, my head rested and she used to tell me her own myths. The myths through which I imagined myself a prince for my *daddi.*

Alas! I am left alone; only their myths are with me. All is gone to heavens. I am in the falling rain without any voice to call me in. My *dada abbu* died before my birth and *daddi amma* used to narrate his myths also, always asking me to believe in his myths too. He had an earnest living that he believed can ensure a pious life and a closeness to Allah. He had his myth of living in the form of an early rise, an early sleep, a balanced diet and simple dressing. He had his dairy business with a lot of buffaloes and cows. The cow milk used to be favourite to him. He used to believe that milk is a *noor* by Allah and whoever mixes water in that *noor* commits a great sin.

How suddenly the things change. With every new day a sense of loss and a feeling of remorse are going to be stored. A fear shudders me when somebody talks about anything new to be achieved. I unconsciously start fearing that it'll be lost suddenly; nothing will be gleeful forever except our myths. *Jennica* too is becoming a myth and I don't know why the sense of communing with her is never dominant. It is perhaps the fear of loss that restricts me thinking like that. I stand there for a long time and then go to bed long before dawn.

It is 8.00 am. It is still raining but the intensity is not so piercing; the drops are creating a metrical pattern of sound while falling on the fibre sheet of balcony. Behind the opaque curtain of the rain drops I see *Saima* entering into the compound with an umbrella in one hand and some books pressed to her chest with her other hand. With her

Daddi Amma: Paternal Grand mother, **Dadda Abbu**: Paternal Grand father, **Noor**: Divine light

bowed eyes she says *salaam* and I reply the same. She entrusts some books to me and enters the kitchen followed by the sound of the manipulation of the kitchen items.

Jennica seems entering into my compound. She is clad in an oriental dress. Her dress and body are soaked in the rain drops. She stops inside the door looking at me with her strange eyes, silently comes near me and extends her hand to take the books in her possession. I deliver the books to her, she returns silently. A smooth touch of hand on my shoulder diverts me. It is my *phupho* who is there:

"Dear son! I know you miss your mother very much. She was a great lady and Allah needs the pious and the great people to join Him early. Now you are mature enough to control yourself." She pats me on my back and a chain of tears fall from her eyes. She sweeps her tears with the corner of her *dupata* and goes back into the room.

I follow her gently and go into the coverlet. I forward a message for casual leave from the college to try to get a little nap. When I get up, I see my *khala, phupho* and *Saima* busy in decorating the table with breakfast items. All are ready for the breakfast. During that we discuss electricity problem, terrorism, expected ruling party in the coming elections, sudden change in weather, new techniques of sowing wheat crops, and so many other things. When we finish our breakfast, all are ready to say farewell to me as they have to visit uncle *Umer Deen* also before leaving for their home towns. At the time of their departure they all bless me with a lot of well wishes and prayers. I come in the street with them and my *phupho* insists me to visit her at some weekend. I promise and she passes loving hands on my head. Then my *khala* kisses my cheeks. *Saima* too is accompanying them. I come to my room and go to sleep. It is the z*ohar* time when the *imam*

masjid Qari Feroz Deen announces *azaan.* I get up and get ready to say my prayer. After the prayer, I come into my study and open my i.d. Here is a *Jennica's* email.

My dear thinker!

I got your email, read it. I am trying to digest it. Me'll reply soon in the form of some queries. Fizza had accommodation issue. I took her to my boardings and offered her to stay with me which she accepted. Now she is here and shares with me a lot of ideas. She is in my adjacent room and is getting less hesitant. She is learning things rapidly. She always shares with me her native myths and feels a great contrast with ours. She perhaps enjoys our myths as much as I enjoy hers. Novelty is always strange and interesting; novel things seem alluring. I feel comfortable in her company and she feels secure in my presence.

Dear thinker! Would you kindly tell me something about women rights at your side? What about the women's social positioning on your side? What I know is that the women are considered as others and inferiors. They are deprived of their due social and marital rights. Polygamy is a common practice.

Hope you will not mind replying.

Regards

...Jennica...

I am quite free today. Send-up exams for the intermediate classes are going on in the college; there are no teaching tasks. I plan to go to the *dera* for sometime earlier than routine but a strange sort of hesitation is there in facing my uncle. I know that he has always been affectionate with me,

yet the last night's event is making me see the things differently. Today even *Javaid* and *Zubia* do not appear. I feel so boring and fed up. I take my bike and go to *Fareed Ali,* my only friend in the village. He serves me with home baked *pakoras* and *raita* of fresh *yogurt*. The hot *pakoras* in such a cool afternoon are really a relishing experience. His mother tells me they are looking for some suitable match for *Fareed Ali*. I show excitement to them and ask them to do as early as possible but our *bhabhi* should not be in short stature. She should be slim and beautiful to be a perfect match with my friend. She promises me to be so. Then she asks me about my plan of marriage which I condition after the arrival of my *bhabhi*. I declare that my *bhabhi* will search a girl for me as a spouse. *Fareed Ali* has his own business of auto spare parts. After his graduation with me, he went for business. He was least interested in further studies and job. He got good response in business. He saved some money apart from having a second-hand *Suzuki Mehran*. That's why her mother is so much excited about his marriage. He also shares with me that after his marriage his wife will manage the home and he will send his mother to offer *Umera.*

After we finish *Pakoras*, *Fareed Ali* asks me so frankly about my absence for so many days. He even feels my unusual silence and remarks that there is something going on inside me which I am not revealing. I try to change the topic but he insists. I ask him to visit me in the evening and I'll share with him so many things. He gets serious and promises to reach me as early as possible. I say salaam to him and get ready to go as it is the time to go to *dera.* As I reach there, I see a gathering of 8 to 10 people, all clad in white *kurtas* with different scents. Our two servants are also busy. There in the field, next to the *dera*, there is big flash light with a large cauldron on fire. Uff! I do remember that my uncle told me last Friday that he would have a get

Pakoras: Fritters, **Raita**: Yogurt/Mint Yogurt, **Bhabi**: Sister-in-law, **Umrah**: Holy pilgrimage

together of his old chums at this particular day. I move forward with a sense of inner shame and outer happiness and greet all the friends of my uncle with warm well-comes. They too hug me warmly and all pat on my shoulders. All is settled soon and we start chatting. The ritual of making *desi gur* is going on with a *qwali* of *Nusrat Fatheh Ali Khan* on a tape recorder in a low tone. I see the ritual is at the final stage. I feel remorse that I did not see crushing of the sugar cane, its filtering and boiling, its cooling and concentration. Now the final stage, molding the cooled juice into solid blocks as *gur* is going on. Even all are eating hot raw material from the large tray . My uncle has also sent two other servants to bring fried fish and *desi chicken karahi* from the *Zaiqa Restaurant*; one of the best ones in the town. Soon there will be a great dinner. I hope they will stay overnight as they have come from far flung areas. I also stay there, serve them, and share the dinner with them. Milk has not been sent to the homes today as uncle has saved it for *doodh patti* for the guests.

I return home. *SugraN apa* brings a bowl covered with a plate. She shows it to me. There is *saag* with butter as topping. It is my aunt who has sent it for me. She knows well that I like it in the wintry mornings with *parathas. SugraN apa* is an expert in making layered *parathas*. She saves it and tells me that she will make *lassi* and layered *parathas* tomorrow in the breakfast.

I observe that *SugraN apa* is somewhat lazy as was not her wont. Her face seems haggard and down, eyes are a little bit red and moist. I ask about her and her kids. She is quiet. I ask her to come in and sit in the sofa. I drag my chair near her. She starts sobbing. I can't understand what happened to her. From my part or from my uncle's part, there has never been any trouble to her. She has been serving us since my childhood. I ask her to tell me what's wrong.

Kurta: Shirt, **Desi gur**: Raw sugar, **Qawali**: a sort of song, **Karahi**: a Punjabi dish
Parathas: Punjabi traditional bread, **Dhood patti**: Tea

She starts *"bao g! bao g!* I am in a great trouble. I did not tell you earlier. I knew that you would not agree with us. My only son *Saleem* had a bad company. He befriended with some crazy boys of the village. They all planned to go to Europe through land route. He insisted me to manage money. I sold my gold chain that was given to me on your birth by *bibi g.* I gave him two lac rupees. It has been three months I have no news about him. Someone told me that they went from Karachi to Iran, from Iran to Turkey, and then from Turkey to Greece. He had his cell phone that was working till Iran. After that no contact was made. I went to the homes of all his friends but returned with no solid news about him."

I go into a shock as many boys I hear are going to Greece through *dunki,* and many bad news are moving around about the fate of such cases. I try to console her, take some particulars about *Saleem* and promise to do something urgent for her. She gets relaxed and goes to the kitchen. I think about the possible ways to trace him side by side the possible outcomes that may happen. I try on his cell number but it is going off.

At night I think of writing to Jennica. I start.

My dear Jennica!

I don't know what to write you exactly. Your queries demand wide range of explanations. So far as your query regarding women's position in our society is worth mentioning. First of all, there is a proper system of inheritance in our religion for the economic and social security of women. A misconception has been spread that a daughter, from the parental property and assets, gets half of the share, and a son gets double as compared to her. It seems quite right if not seen going beyond the literal sense

Dunki: Illegal migration to other countries.

and understanding the whole social context. A daughter gets half of the asset, no doubt, but as a wife, when she is married, she gets the maximum social and economic rights as the counterpart of her husband. She gains a tabulated share from the assets of her husband. Quite interesting is that a husband, a long as his wife is alive, can claim any share from her privately inherited assets from her parents. A son seems miserable to me as he gets the share from the assets of his father once and that is all.

Polygamy is a common practice here. Right. Another misconception that always prevails and is given as a misnomer to us. If you see the history of mankind, near and far, you may find there have been wars, battles, natural disasters, environmental shocks and pandemics. We also see day to day road accidents that toll so many lives. In all these cases, there have been deaths on a large scale. If viewed numerically, keeping gender ratio in mind, we see most of the affected ones are male. They are directly exposed to all these hits. Female side is less affected for being less social and less exposed. Times came, times come, times will come with the disturbance of gender ratio. If we think that one single man is for one single woman, what will be the physical and emotional state of being of the unmarried lot of the female gender. Again, if seen from gynecological point of view, the infant mortality rate, for males in Pakistan in particular, and in the world in general, is higher than for females. This is another alarming situation. There may be some justifications for physical relief through lesbian and gay practices on your side, but here with us these are highly condemnable for being unnatural.

So far as a woman's witness in our religious jurisprudence is concerned, there has been clearly mentioned that a woman's witness will be considered half as compared to a

man's. Our religious scripture states that both men and women are equally reliable witnesses. Now the point of difference comes from the social positioning of women. You should have in mind that women, here on our side, are less social and less exposed to the societal affairs of life. They have their social lives, no doubt, but their primary and major role is their own territory; their homes where they have their own liabilities and say. For being less social, they may not be the full witness of some event, accident, incident, casualty or crime. They may have seen or heard that but there may be some doubts. Our religion does not call for a half witness from her part for being a female but for being less confirm and less accurate. This is to ensure the rule of justice; not to denigrate a woman's role in our society.

With best wishes.

…Thinker…

The email is gone with the press of *send* button on the screen.

Chapter -V

Time paces slow. Time paces swift. Flowers bloom inside. Flowers bloom outside. In slow measured steps we dare to pluck roses. They promise fragrance. We snip off roses with swift lusty jerks. Thorns pierce in fingers with pangs of pain. We are clever. We are idiot.

Mornings and evenings go on. Days turn into weeks. Weeks collapse into months. Things change inside. Things change outside. We name them seasons. Seasons measure change. Seasons change from one extreme point to another. The temperature zone between the two extremes is what we call spring. Flowers bloom outside and new hopes pine up inside.

SugraN apa is constantly asking me about her son. Sometimes, she implores in words and some others times with helpless eyes. I am unable to trace *Saleem* yet. I tried

to find the contacts of his fellows. They said that he was with them till Turkey, but after that, they did not know about him. One of the boys told that he had been in fever for many days for which they did not wait him to recover and went with them to Greece. I also contacted the Turkish embassy in Pakistan through email and contact numbers but with no hope. The only hope was to trace someone in Turkey who might help me. One of my old students told me that his cousin was there but with an illegal status. After a struggle of 3 to 4 days, I got in contact with him. He promised to help me as much as possible. He also told me his restrictions for being illegal. I sent him contact number of *Saleem*, a copy of his passport and three different photos. He said he would try to trace.

It is the start of April. *Jennica* is sending me emails which I try to reply as perfectly as I can. Mostly, she asks me about my domestic and social values, and sometimes some religious obligations which I try to explain to the best of my knowledge and information. Her words, sometimes, seem carrying so many implications. In one of her emails she writes, *What about two minds living together when the souls are poles apart?* In another text she exclaims, c*an the two bodies resolve the conflicts that reside in two minds!* In one of her recent emails she expresses, *How can two souls fly alike when the bodies and the minds resist each other!*

I have no particular replies for all these. I compose some verses and send to her.

Dwellers of hilly areas

Have their pines and cones

Reside among the stones

Stones are like the bones

They have lust for gush

To arid areas they rush.

Dwellers of arid areas

Grow guavas and grapes

They relish all the shapes

Mangoes in their debates

They wish to mount aloft

And trace some hilly croft

I am a coast dweller!

among shells and crabs

Thinking what to sow?

Planning what to grow?

(Thinker)

This is the first time I write English verses. I do not know from where they come and what they mean, but they are there to out-pour my inside. Whatever hard it is to communicate in person, we say in poetry. Without having a second glance, I click on the *send* option and the delivery is successful.

It is rather difficult to understand either her statements are exclamations or questions. I, sometimes, ignore such things in my replies and she never insists too. Perhaps she is trying to solve intricacies as much as I am trying to do. In her emails she often tells me about her friendship with *Fizza* that is growing stronger. She is adjusted in American society. She has many new friends at the university campus but she tries to be reserved about her personal affairs. She trusts her only as a confidant to her. In the start, she had regular calls from her home but now there are calls on weekends mostly.

She told *Jennica* her own myth that she was once engaged to a boy who was more qualified and more well off than she. Their engagement lasted for three months till the boy expressed his preference to another girl who was more sophisticated and more affluent in matter of her studies and wealth. That boy married her which *Fizza* took at heart and remained upset for so many weeks. Later on her parents proposed to marry her with *Faizan*, the son of her father's distant relatives. He was only matric pass and lived in *Uggoki*, a periphery of *Sialkot.* He had so many disputes and lawsuits about his land and other things. He was handsome, no doubt, but did not suit her for his education and other civic matters. She didn't give her consent in favor of *Faizan,* rather she requested her parents to send her to the USA for higher studies. She faced some resistance from her mother, but at last, she agreed and things settled. She is now in the USA as a student in the anthropology department at *Cathedral of Learning Pitts, PA*. In the matter of her marriage and settlement she is still undecided.

Here in Punjab, April is in full swing. In the morning boughs of the trees with new spouts look like the fairies trying to come out of the long imprisonment of the giants. The huge *peepal* tree at my *dera* is the special interest for

Sialkot: A city in Pakistan

me. Inside its bulky stem there is a long hole where the parrots nest. This season there are four new ones with small circles of orange color around their necks. My father once explained me that such parrots can be trained to speak. I never want to encage and train them for speaking, yet I often imagine them saying 'good morning', '*Allah hoo'*, '*salam bibi jee'*, etc. In the last spring my cousins *Raheel* and *Zubia* took two small ones at home and put them in a cage but my uncle *Umer Deen* taunted them by saying that they are the free creatures of *Allah.* Let them move in freedom other wise *Allah* will get angry with them. At that *Raheel* had to put them back in their hole of the *peepal* tree.

Since the visit of my *khala* and *phupho,* my cousin Samia stopped visiting my home except the day she came to return me the books she once borrowed. Perhaps she is as morbid in facing me as I am in facing my uncle *Umer Deen* and aunt *Zuhra*. I also feel that my uncle is gonna less frank with me than before. We talk whenever we need to talk. His affection is not lessened, yet he mostly remains reserved.

I am in the lawn of my house with a basket of *fruiters.* Our maid *SugraN apa* appears and declares in her own hesitant accent,

"*Bao jee!* I can't do all the house works alone now. I need someone to help me. I have grown old and get exhausted very soon."

I reply smilingly,

"Don't worry I can manage some maid to wash clothes so that your burden will be reduced."

But she replies shyly,

Peepal: a tree, **Allah hoo**: Praise of Allah

"Bao jee! I don't mean any maid but I want the owner of this house. I want to pamper the small kids and want to listen to their noise. All the day, here is dead silence which teases me."

I give a smile and she bends her head with love and affection at the same time. I assure her to think over the matter as early as possible. She gets satisfied and goes to the kitchen to bring plates and salt for me.

SugraN apa has her own myth of sufferings. She belongs to a poor family of the village *Chak Chatta,* a village near district *Hafizabad*. In her early age she was married; hardly 19. Her husband was twice in age to her. In four years they got three daughters for which her mother in law could not afford her without a baby boy. She forced her son to divorce her and remarry with her niece. She was sent to her father's house who was an employee at our lands. He discussed his pains with my father. My father brought *SugraN apa* home because it was not possible to get her married again. Her son *Saleem* was born after her expulsion from her husband's home. The news of the birth of a baby boy reached her in-laws but no one cared. She herself was not willing to reunite or remarry anywhere. I used to be a school going kid in those days. She got attached with me, and always treated me like her son. She daily escorted me to school and at the off time she used to be at the school gate. She seemed to forget her past and my father and mother always treated her with care and love. After the death of my parents she never let me feel inconvenient regarding my necessities. That is the reason my relatives are satisfied that *SugraN apa* is far enough to manage the home. Now she is in her late fifties but she is still energetic and willing to do every task of home as perfectly as she used to do in her youth.

Hafizabad: A District in Punjab, Pakistan.

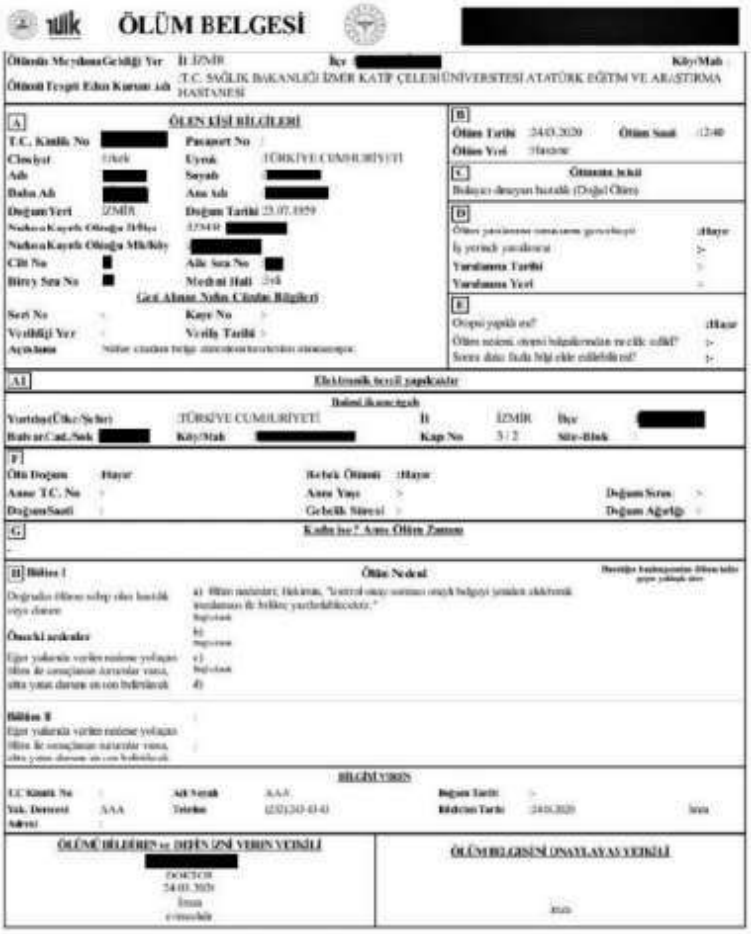
I know that she is feigning to be exhausted of daily routine. She wishes me now to get married and, no doubt, her demand is logical. It is the ripe time for me to get married and have clamor of small kids in the home; partially to satisfy my social position, and partially to acknowledge the rightful demand of my mother-like lady.

I call her to me and ask her to sit comfortably in the chair. I tell her about *Saleem*. Whatever the information I gathered from some of my students of his age is that he was quite safe till Turkey. Some of them told they had calls and messages from him. He was telling that he got fever for which he was taking medicine. But after some days his cell got off. Since that day, no one knows where he is. That is the story I tell to *SugraN apa* to make her relax.

There is another story, the story I got reported from the boy from Turkey I had requested assistance. He informed that in Turkey, deaths are recorded by the hospital, forensic unit or prosecutor. That depends on the circumstances in which the person dies. A death report *Ölüm Belgesi* is sent to the local registry office *Nüfus Dairesi* by the local health authority to register the death.

The registry office then gives a local death certificate *Formul C* to either the next of kin, an appointed local funeral director or a solicitor. The *Formul C* death certificate does not state the cause of death. If no kin is traced, the certificate is reserved with the *Nüfus Dairesi. It* can be issued later on if someone requests. He further informed me that only *Saleem's* name and Father's name were traced; no other data. According to the report, he was found dead in a tram-car waiting room bench by the local police. The dead body, after a wait of two weeks, was buried in the *Ithin*, the graveyards of *Kilyos* in Istanbul. He

promised to visit that graveyard and see his burial name-plate. He also emailed me an image of the *Ölüm Belgesi'*.



ÖLÜM BELGESİ

I dare to reveal to *SugraN apa* but I can't. I try to keep it for some other time; in parts, in full, or never perhaps. What is done is done; it can't be undone now. I decide to tell the whole event to *Fareed Ali* for further verification.

Today I hail towards my *dera* before the evening prayers. On the way I stay under the huge *shah-baloot* tree with its branches hanging down. In our childhood, my cousin *Saima* and I used to swing a sway on it. We used to tie the lower edges of the branches together in order to make the swing. She used to push me up and I insisted her to do with more strength so that I might soar higher. On her turn on the swing, she used to be afraid of the downward move. How innocent we used to be in those days! Gone are the days but the swing is still there. Now *Raheel* and *Zubia* enjoy swings on the same branches of the *shah-baloot*. I am lost in my childhood. Phone bell rings to bring me back to my present. It is my *khalu Shabbir* on the other side. He inquires me about my health and my job. He further inquires me about my study plan and about my intention to go abroad. I inform him that everything is going well. I explain him that I am still working on my plan for studying abroad. I am well aware that *khalu Shabbir* wishes to hear my consent about my engagement but he is using a sophisticated way. I try to satisfy him that I'll soon visit him and will discuss all the issues in detail. He appreciates my idea and utters an advance welcome on the part of my aunt also. He further informs me that I'll not come for one day only, for a week at least, for hunting doves, catching fishes, having home baked *parathas, pinni* made in *desi ghee, gajar halwa and gajar kheer* with yogurt in the mornings. He insists me to come as early as possible because that is the season of doves. In the evening they are in abundance in the field and in the trees. I promise to be early, though I know well that it is not easy to spare time from such a busy routine of the college. The study session in these days is at the peak. My uncle blesses me with so many prayers. I thank him too and the call is off.

It is Thursday evening of the week. Every Thursday our *imam masjid Qari Feroz Deen* delivers special *dars* after

Shah-baloot: a tree, **Dars**: Religious speech

the evening prayers. It is for 20 to 25 minutes. All the devotees listen to him carefully, and at the end they ask different problems faced by them in their daily life. Today the *dars i*s on '*The importance of khaloos in our lives*'. He defines *khaloos* as one's love, respect and help for one's fellows without any materialistic concern. He concludes his *dars* by saying that a husband and wife who are sincere to each other in this world will live together in the next world. At the end of the *dars* I ask him, "what is love?" He smiles, clears his throat, straightens his back to have a support with pulpit and says,

"There are two aspects my son! one is love and the second is *ishq*. Love is when we like someone's physical features, and *ishq* is when we like someone beyond that one's physical features. *Ishq* transcends all physical lust and cravings. In a common sense both may be taken same but in deeper sense they are poles apart. Love may decrease with the loss of someone's physical charm, but *ishq* is the bond and agreement of souls."

At the end, he passes a smile as he has discovered the exact nature of my question. I nod head in affirmation and i*mam sahib* lifts his hands in prayers followed by all of us. He prays for the well being of all. He also prays for the blessing of *khaloos* to all of us. All say *ameen,* and we move our hands on our faces. I go to *imam sahib* to say *salam*. He pats on my shoulder and blesses me with special prayers. I bow in respect and leave for home.

At the same night my friend *Fareed Ali* visits me. He is so much excited and has brought two shopping bags. In one, there are hot *jallabies,* and in other there are recently roasted peanuts. For him, Friday is off, and on some Thursday nights he specially comes to stay with me till late. He wants to disclose some secret to me, he says. First

Jallabies: Spiral and crunchy sweets in Punjab.

of all we eat *jallibies.* After that the peanut cracking starts disturbing the silence of the room. We sit in the same coverlet. He tells me his mother has found a girl for him. She is an educated one. She is B.A and B.Ed, and a teacher in a primary school. He also reveals that he has her photo. He abruptly opens his wallet and from the secret pocket of it, he draws out a passport size photo. She is really amazing beauty with long neck, wide forehead and bold eyes. Her innocence was quite visible from her loosely closed lips and rosy cheeks. I appreciate her mother's choice. *Fareed Ali* chirps with excitement. He throws hand at my hand expressing that they will be an ideal couple. He suddenly pauses and gets silent. In the serious tone he inquires, "When will you get married? I hear from someone that you are going to be engaged to your cousin *Saima*. But why you didn't tell me? Am I not your friend anymore?"

He looks at me with a feigned sort of anger on his face. I smile and present him the peanuts which he has forgotten to eat in his excitement. He refuses to take it and inquires me why I kept the secret. I say sorry to him and promise to tell everything from there onwards. He smiles with an expression of reconciliation and accepts the handful of peanuts from me. I tell him the whole issue of *Jennica. I* also explain the story of the arrival of the families of my *Phupho* and *Khala* to my home with a proposal for *Saima.* For a short moment he gets silent, then puts many queries in surprise, "Do you wish to go to America for *Jennica?* Are you serious about her? Will it be possible for you to settle there or will she manage to settle here with you?"

His innocent queries cum exclamations demand answers at the spot, but I find no proper words to explain him the real situation. He is still curious and wants to listen to me. I briefly tell him that the things are still undecided in my mind. I just say that it is so hard to have *Jennica* and

Topi: Cap, **Allah Hafiz**: Goodbye greetings

double-harder to reject *Saima*. I take a friendly oath from *Fareed Ali* for not revealing anything with anyone till the matters get settled. He agrees and swears for that. He suddenly looks at the wall clock where the big hand is trying to cross twelve and small hand is at eleven. It is too late for him. He hurriedly covers himself in his *chadar,* wears his woolen *topi* on head and gets ready to leave. I see him off at the doorstep and request him to pray for me. He promises to come to me as early as possible. He says Allah Hafiz to me. I lock the gate as *SugraN Apa* has slept long before. The rhythmic sound of her snorting is resounding in the main hall. I switch off the main light and go to my bedroom to have a sleep.

Night is too long. The whole time seems to be in a surrealistic journey. I wander in strange and unseen places; ruins of old buildings, deserted brick houses, semi dark tunnels, strange deserts, and the places I can't name them even. I am thirsty but with no water. An empty bowl is in my hand with a lone desert around. The oasis appears but at a large distance. A glitter of water flickers there. I run to the oasis hoping to have water. I reach the expected spot. A dune mocks at me with its dry body. I look around. No water, just illusions. My lips are dry and my feet are too heavy to be lifted. Lifeless legs. I sit down on my knees with my face lifted upward. I feel a pat on my feet followed by a voice. "*Bao jee!* 8 o'clock, your breakfast, ready. Hurry up. I can heat it again on stove. Light is off. Gas is also off." It is *SugraN Apa* who is calling. I get up hurriedly, fatigued and weird, as coming from a long fruitless journey.

I hurriedly get ready for my college. It is really too late. All the time at college I have the broken images of the previous night in my mind. I am unable to understand the nature and implication of that dream. At evening after the

magrib prayer, I visit *Fareed Ali* whose mother gets so much excited to see me. In a single strain of speech, she tells me when and how my friend *Fareed Ali* is going to be married. She expresses she will arrange a big function of *mehandi* where all of *Fareed's* friends will be invited. I express my pleasure too, followed by a sigh within me which *Fareed's* mother doesn't note. I realize that mothers are the rarest blessings of *Allah Almighty*. *Fareed Ali* hugs me. We sit in the drawing room and start planning about shopping, sewing and other preparations. I promise to go to bazaar with him the very next Sunday after the date is fixed. He also reveals to me about his savings and the expected expenses on his marriage. I assure him that all will be managed with the passage of time. He seems satisfied.

Her mother offers us dry fruit and the mugs of hot milk which we take and keep on discussing the matters related to his relatives, expected number of people on *baraat, walima* function and the dishes to be served to the guests.

Mehandi: A wedding ceremony, **Bazaar**: Market, **Baraat**: Wedding gathering, **Walima**: Post-wedding ceremony

Chapter - VI

Life is scheduled into unscheduled episodes of pleasure and pain. Time ensures the schedule with the rod of chance. Sometimes, long stretches of clock merge into seconds, and some other times, small ticks extend to long and painful centuries.

The year is moving from winter to autumn, and autumn has yet to herald spring in Punjab. *Jennica's* emails continue to enrich my inbox. I keep on saving them in a draft so that they are not auto-deleted. In my inbox there are hundreds of emails but in my draft there are only *Jennica's e*mails and my replies to her. My draft is the only place where no one other can intrude, I think. *Jennica* and *thinker*, *thinker* and *Jennica*. Dear *Jennica* and dear *thinker*. My *thinker* and *my Jennica*. *My dear thinker* and *my dear Jennica*. I do not know since when we started using the pronominal adjective '*my'* with our names. I recall it is Jennica who

coined such determiners as ‘dear’ and ’my’ and I followed her in my replies.

It is the first week of June. I receive an email from her with an attachment.

My dear thinker!

We are getting too bored. Fizza’s semester is going to be end. She is always busy in her assignments, quizzes and presentations. Just at weekends, we wander outside and share some ideas. I told her about you. She was stunned at first, but got curious then. The last weekend she had a call from her home. Her mama and papa talked to me also and thanked me for cooperating with their daughter. They blessed me with a lot of prayers. They seem so nice. This weekend they called too and informed Fizza that they were going to arrange the marriage of Ali Sher, her elder brother. They had fixed the date 25th July so that Fizza might be able to join them as her semester would be over till then. They also talked to me and requested me to accompany Fizza and join the function. I tried to apologize and say sorry, but with the love and affection her mother invited, I could say nothing. I made a half promise as I told her that I would seek permission from my brother. I know my brother will not risk such permission. He believes, as I too, that Karachi is the most dangerous zone regarding terrorism and mass killing. Foreigners are especially at risk all the time. When the call got off, Fizza started dancing and singing in ecstasy. Her excitement is still out of bounds. I have not yet decided. I just want to consult you regarding my visit to your areas prior to have permission from my brother. Hope you will advise me best.

I have sent an attachment having some pics of my farewell function at university. I have been awarded the first class in

my group as usual. You know my last semester will turn off with Fizza's. Fizza and me had chalked out a plan to visit Baltimore at the end of the session, but now it does not seem feasible.

Wishing you smiles.

...Jennica…

It is late at night when I read the email. I don't reply at the moment as I am much tired today. The whole day *Fareed Ali* and I visit the different shops, select the dresses for his *mehandi*, *shadi* and *walima;* purchase three new pairs of *Inam* shoes. We make an advance booking with a beautician, order *shadi* cards at the printing press, meet the marriage-hall proprietor and advise him to make everything well-done on the *walima* day. Night falls. I reach home. I read the email twice but I don't click on attachment. I switch off the screen and request *SugraN apa* to bring me a cup of hot milk with honey in it. I sip it and go to sleep before the usual routine.

I get up a little bit earlier but with a series of tasks in my mind. Teaching classes at college is as usual, but *Fareed Ali's* mother has called me. I take the short leave from college and go to listen to her. She gives me a long list of the guests who are gonna be invited on the wedding. She advises me to collect the invitation cards from the printing press and write them as early as possible because there are so many other matters she has to handle. I go to the printing press with *Fareed Ali* and bring bundles of invitation cards with a crisp, synthetic odor that is coming from the newly printed cards.

I take a lunch there with *Fareed Ali*. He starts mentioning me the names of his relatives in a jolly mood. We finish the

whole task a few minutes before the *magrib*. I take leave with the plea that I have to bring milk from the *dera.* I hurriedly go to the *dera*. My uncle tells me that he was getting worried for me being late to reach the *dera*. I explain him the whole matter. He gets satisfied. All the time, on my way back, I keep on thinking about *Jennica's* email and the possible words to reply. I even imagine *Jennica's* pics which are still unseen. At night I don't wish to see her pics with a fatigued mind and physique. I wish to see her in quite a leisure and pleasure. At the evening there is a call from my *phupho Sakeena* that there is going to be a birthday of their youngest son on 10th of July. She advises me to come and join them. She also informs me that it will be a family get-together. *Saima* will also come as her exams will be over till then, she says in half-serious tone. She will stay for a week or two. When the *phupho* takes a pause, I can't speak for some seconds. She confirms my presence by saying 'hello' I reply that it will not be possible to join them on that particular day. I explain her about *Fareed Ali's* marriage. She gets silent as she knows well that *Fareed Ali* is like a brother to me. Anyhow, she asks me to make a promise to come soon after the marriage. I assure her and the call is off.

Today the routine is quite usual. The tragedy with *Saleem* is the only factor that keeps on haunting my mind and heart all the day. Night falls. I am all alone in my room as usual; half lying, laptop is in my lap, capped, *chadar* on shoulders, legs in the coverlet. I open *Jennica's* email, read it again, open the attachment. The first one is a group photo of six girls. All are happy and smiling. I can't guess at first who is *Jennica*. I gaze all for some minutes individually. I try to guess. From the right at second number, the girl seems to be different in her smile and in her way of standing. She is of normal stature with fair complexion and blonde hair. Rest of the girls are less

attentive to camera while that one is in direct contact with camera and seems as if she were looking at me perhaps. This is *Jennica*, I suppose; I am sure. From some corner of my heart a sleety sound comes. "Don't suppose but believe, this is *Jennica*." She is really an amazing one with her full dress and casual jacket. The rest of the girls are in shorts and skirts but *Jennica* is quite different in her dressing too.

I click the next snapshot. It is only of one girl, *Jennica;* standing in front of a huge gigantic structure of the *Cathedral* with a medal around her neck reaching down to the space between her bulging parts of her breast. I recall Alexander Pope's poetic lines,

" On her white Breast a sparkling Cross she wore,
Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore."

In her hands she has a shield where her name, first position and the name of the university are quite visible. Her long hair are tied behind the head making her forehead broad and shiny. Her cheeks are dimpled as she smiles, and on the right and left cheek are dim specks like moles. There are total six pictures. In the rest of the five she is in a group. I save them all in my downloads and start writing her,

My dear Jennica!

I got your email with attachments. So many congratulations to you. You, a lucky one. It is really a magnificient achievement on your part. An important milestone of your life is achieved. I saw your pics that are really amazing and laudable. Special thanks for sharing all these memories with me.

You told me about Fizza's family. They seem so nice to me too as you explained. You asked me about my opinion

about your arrival here. Thanks for the trust. No doubt the shadows of death loom here in Karachi all the time, but I believe that more is shown on media than what actually happens. Here are so many issues that cause disorder and disturbance. You wish to come to attend the marriage ceremony. So safe, so secure. If you wish to stay for some longer duration, you must visit my areas. Quite green, prosperous, open and cozy. You are the student of anthropology. Our culture will really appeal you. Reading about someone's culture is quite different from seeing it and living it. Here are the least risks of terror and violence in Punjab. You may stay here as long as you wish. Just settle your confirmation with your brother and inform me about your arrival. Here my friend's marriage is about to happen at the start of July. After that I'll be quite free.

…Thinker…

I send the email and think it is either a truth or some dream. I don't know why I am going to offer her so frankly to come and stay with me. I, at the same time, recall the practical problems I am facing regarding my settlement with *Saima*. Anyhow, the things seem going out of routine, and the coming days seem to be unusual. I should have thought over the matter seriously before sending the mail but what can be done now. I spell all the ill omens off and drift into the dreamy presence of *Jennica* with me. Jennica and me at one place, at one table, and so on.

The phone bell brings me back into my senses. It is *Fareed Ali* who is calling me to reach *bazaar* to place orders and advance payment to *mesahri* makers. He further advises me that mesahri should be of fresh roses. I don't know how we forgot such an important thing, and how that idea came to *Fareed Ali*. His next call comes with the purchase of *qulla*

Mesahri: Wedding bed, **Qulla**: A special head dress for groom.

from *Malik Bridal Dress*. "Uff…how much lazy he is!" I murmur.

Anyhow, I go to the *Saed Nagri bazaar* and arrange the task of *mesahri* after a long bargain with *mesahri* makers and flower vendors. I also pick *qulla* in maroon from *Malik Bridal Dress.* After evening, he comes to me and asks me what should be there as the first night gift to his wife. I have the least notion about such things. After a long debate, we decide a gold ring. He gives me the money at the spot and requests me to manage the ring even and asks me to keep it safe till the wedding night. I agree to his idea with a blink of my eye. We part with the hope to see next day at noon for further consultations.

It is the 8th of July. The *Asar* time is over. It is about to be dark now. I go to the *dera. Uncle Umer Deen* asks me if I need anything for his friend's marriage. I say thanks to him. He further advises me to participate fully as he is the only friend of me who loves me like his brother. I assure my uncle to be so. He also informs that on the very day of *Fareed Ali's* marriage is the birthday of *phophu Sakeena's* youngest son. He consoles me that I should not get worry. He will go with whole family and manage the things there. In his absence, I will just visit the *dera* twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, I inform him. Rest of the works will be managed by the servants. After that conversation with my uncle, I return home with the buckets of milk.

It is the 9th of July. The whole day I remain busy with *Fareed Ali* as it is his *mehandi night*. We have to make arrangements for friends and relatives. We do all the things to our best. I am more occupied in arrangements than the *mehandi* itself. After *Isha* time, *Fareed Ali* is seated in a decorated chair and the function starts. There are songs,

dances, *dholak* and the small candles in plates. All are dressed in yellow and green. Small kids in fairy dresses are worth-seeing. I tease *Fareed Ali* time and again by pronouncing the name of my new *bhabi* in his ear. He warns me to be silent and implores me not to tell anybody that he has her photo in his wallet. I just pass smile and he seems thankful. A great festivity; all the family friends and business friends of *Fareed Ali* are there. They stay till late, have dinner of *haleem chawal*, *raishmi kebab*, salad mixed with pickle, *gulab jamin;* and green tea as dessert.

The night passes swiftly. The next day is the day of his *barat. Barat* has to go to *Rustam Pur*, a village about 15 kilometers away from our location. Flying-coaches come, and are in wait for the guests to be ready and sit in. The car for *Fareed Ali* is especially decorated with artificial and natural flowers. The musical band arrives before time. *Fareed Ali* goes to the beauty salon and takes about two hours to get ready. The whole *barat* gets ready and departs. All goes smooth. We reach *Rustam Pur*. The barat is cordially well-comed with flowers and petals. There is exchange of warm greetings. Dance, *bhangra, luddi,* currency notes in the air and all that one can imagine in a traditional *shaadi* festival in Punjab. *Nikkah rasm* is performed with a long prayer for the happy life of the couple. There is a great hustle and bustle and a chit chat after the *nikkah*. Dishes are served. All eat to their fill. The guests start scattering. Only the few are left. We request *Fareed Ali's* brother in-law to take the groom and the bride groom to the stage. They express their willingness and manage to take the new couple to the stage for departure ceremonies. I get a call from the *mesahri* maker that the work is done. I expose it to *Fareed Ali* who seems thankful and excited at the same time. In almost half an hour, the groom and the bride-groom are seated in the car with

Dholak: Pre-wedding musical celebration, **Haleem, Chawal, Kebab**: Eastern cuisine
Gulab Jamun: Sweets, **Bhangra, Luddi**: Cultural dances, **Nikkah**: Wedlock

prayers and well wishes. We all move towards our hometown.

The sun is about to descend. I settle the things on my part hurriedly and head towards the *dera*. After bringing milk I give both of the buckets to *SugraN apa* as my uncle's family has gone to my *phuphu's* town. *SugraN apa* suggests to give one bucket to *Fareed Ali's* home so that they may make and serve tea to the guests. I agree and she goes to F*areed Ali's* home. On her return, she has a big tray of *biryani* and f*ried chicken* sent by *Fareed Ali's* mother for us. I and *SugraN apa* will eat in dinner. At night I open my email inbox. Here is one of them from *Jennica.*

My dear thinker !

I got your text. Thanks a lot for invitation. Fizza too is much consistent in escorting me to her home. I talked to my brother who, at first took it a joke, but when I told him in detail, he got agreed. I have checked the schedule of flights to Pakistan. Seats in a flight to Karachi on 20th July are available. Fizza and I have also done our shopping. Fizza's mother has managed some fancy dresses for me and Fizza. Hope, we'll reach there on 22nd, I am sending you Fizza's landline number that she has provided me. You may send your own if you can. Hope to see you soon and stay 'LONG' with you.

Wishing you nice.

…Jennica…

I get so much confused and excited at the same time; unable to decide whether I should be worried or excited. Anyhow, the word 'LONG' in capital alphabets and in single inverted commas in the last sentence seems a joke

more than anything else. In her emails during the last month, I guess, that she started making little jokes. This word 'LONG' is perhaps a part of her subtle joke. I do not think over it anymore and save the landline number of *Fizza's* home.

I click on reply and write,

My dear Jennica!

You are most well-come here. Waiting for you. Hope to give you best possible company. Me sending you my photo in attachment. My cell number is there at the bottom with my full address. Please inform me about your deperture from there and arrival at Karachi.

Wishing you a safe flight.

...Thinker...

I attach a recent photo of mine from my album in the laptop. It is a photo where I am standing under a *sheesham* tree in an evening time. The yellowish sun descending behind western horizon is quite visible through the branches of the the *sheesham.* After that there is no email from *Jennica*. I am sure she will contact me as soon as she takes her flight. It is the 22nd of July and at about quarter past twelve a call comes on my cell phone. I pick it up at the third bell. A sleety sound speaks *hi! here is Jennica*. *We have landed quite safe. This is Fizza's number. She will manage for me my personal cell number soon. Anyhow you may feel quite easy in calling at this number."*

I murmur words of thanks to Allah for her safe arrival. This is the first time I listen to her voice. It is just the first live talk with *Jennica.* Her accent is quite fabulous, with a pitch of 200 Hz, I suppose. I am unable to reconcile my senses as

Sheesham: A tree

the articulations of hers and auditory patterns of mine are not aligned. It takes some seconds to catch her words and meanings. I say thanks and well-come, and I advise her to take rest. I promise to call her soon.

On the 23rd of July, she calls me in the evening from another number and informs me that it is her personal one. I ask about her experience being here. She tells me that all is well and charming. She explains that *Fizza's* family is so much affectionate and loving. They came to receive me and Fizza from the airport with all their relatives even. They offered me bouquets of red roses and yellow marigold. They are treating me more than their own daughter, and I am feeling a sense of homeliness here. She promises to call me later as she and *Fizza* are going to the jewellery shop and boutique. She says me bye and good luck.

On the 24th of July, in the afternoon, I call her. There is much noise and clamour in the background. She tells me that there is a big gathering of *Fizza's* relatives. All are especially excited to see and meet her. She is unable to find any leisure. We can not talk properly, and I just say, "*Take care dear."*

I know on the 25th of July, there is marriage ceremony and *Jennica* will not be available to talk for much of the time. I just dial her number in the noon and try to make a courtesy call. She attends the call and assures me that she is quite fine and is all the time surrounded by *Fizza's* cousins, relatives and friends. I ask her to call me as she finds time. She promises. On 26th July, at about 10 am, *Jennica* calls me. There is heard no clamor and noise in the background. She tells me that she is in a lawn and most of the people are still sleeping. She utters sorry for not talking in detail to me. I assure that I do not mind such things and ask her to enjoy as much as she can. She expresses her happiness by

saying that all the people here are so friendly. They are full of life and sentiments. *Fizza's* father and mother treat her more than their own daughter.

"That is all new for me. The m*ehndi* night was really a fun. *Dholak*, songs and dance by all was so ecstatic. All were in yellow clothes with yellow garlands. Red petals on the stage were spread in abundance. I was lost in these festivities. I felt that I have been long part of these traditions. Nothing is queer. Even the dishes offered have special taste. They are love-added. The celebrations went on till the early dawn even. I and *Fizza* always eat in the same dish. It does not happen in our culture. Here are also servants and maids to serve us. On the day of the *baraat* of *Fizza's* brother, all ladies had embroidered dresses, and all were loaded with jewellery. They seemed in competition. Fizza's mother had a special *saree* for me in parrot green. I turned orient. I had also bangles of red and yellow. No one, even I, when standing before a mirror, was able to realize that I was an alien to this culture."

I listen to her and appreciate her. Each word of hers is full of excitement. She expresses that she wishes to see me. She promises to discover the possible time to reach Islamabad. I suggest her to come by air from Karachi to Islamabad, and from there I will take her to my hometown. I further advise her to escort *Fizza* in order to avoid any discomfort. She agrees and promises to call me soon.

On the same night, she calls me again and informs that she consulted *Fizza* about her visit to Islamabad. *Fizza* discussed the matter with her family by saying that I and she would visit some important places of Islamabad and Murree. They agreed upon that. Fizza will be with me so that I am comfortable and easy. "*Fizza's* papa hired two seats in a domestic flight going from Karachi to Islamabad

on 28th July. I hope we will reach there at 11 am." I assure her to be there before time, and say good bye.

The whole night I can't sleep properly. I think I am not mentally prepared for such a situation. Nothing is clear; all opaque and foggy. All cords of thinking are getting entangled. I try to review the whole situation from different angles in order to make some final framework but of no avail. Night passes in vigils.

Next morning comes with the day 27th of July. I reach *Fareed Ali.* He is worried to see me so early there. He takes me to his drawing room decorated with new sofas and dining table as got in dowry. I disclose him everything about *Jennica* and *Fizza* and their arrival. He is stunned, gets mum for some seconds. He tries to encourage me, but I insist that he should accompany me to the airport. He thinks for a while and explains that he has to collect some money from his client at Rawalpindi. He agrees to manage that deal with his client the same day. He will go with me there, but I will go to airport to pick *Jennica* and *Fizza* alone. After that they will settle some meeting point on cell phones. He suggests me to decide the further plans of accommodation and other things after meeting with *Jennica* and *Fizza*. I agree with him and return home.

The whole day is really a long time. At night I try to sleep early as we will leave for Islamabad at 8:00 am. The whole night my sleep is interrupted time and again with nightmares and fantasies. Such things did not happen ever with me in my past. *Fajar Azan* is announced by the *imam masjid.* I go to *masjid*. After the prayer, the *imam sahib* delivers a *dars* on the topic, *'death keeps no calendar'.* Life, he explains through references, grows in the shadow of death and only death is the fact of life. The real life is the life afterward. At the end of *dars imam sahib* looks at me

with a smile of appreciation. I bow my head down with a sense of shame and respect knowing well that he is suggesting me to rise early everyday as today. I nod. He pats on my left shoulder blessing me with prayers.

It is 28th of July 2010. It is Wednesday. At about twenty to eight *Fareed Ali* comes in Toyota Corolla car from one of his friends and asks me to hurry up. I am already up. We set off to our destination to Islamabad. "They will land on the *Benazir Bhutto International Airport* Islamabad", I tell him. He says that he knows all the routes better. We keep on chatting. He is restless to tell me many things about his new life, but I feel, he is reluctant to share at that particular time. I, too, am engrossed in myself; not prepared to listen to him properly.

It is near *Sohawa* that a heavy rain starts. Car wipers start working in a rhythmic pattern. The weather is getting romantic, exclaims Fareed Ali. He inserts a CD in the player of the car with the romantic songs. We both start singing in low tunes also with the singer. He repeats the songs many times, *kia tujhey pata ha aY gulshan meray dilbar aaney waley haiN?* (O Garden! Do you know my beloved is gonna come?). Our car is moving with slower speed now but with refreshing mood. At the toll plaza of Islamabad entry, I drop *Fareed Ali* who takes a taxi and goes to see his business client. He advises me to be confident and brave. I head towards the airport. It is ten past ten when I am in the parking lot of the airport. I park the car, take my umbrella and move toward the waiting area. I sit on a chair in front of the arrival section of the airport. On the electronic screen there is flickering *Air Blue Flight 202,* time of landing 10:45 am. There is still much time to wait. I go to cafe, take a cup of cappuccino coffee, see the shower of the rainfall. I observe that the drops of the rain are making bubbles. It will be piercing and will

extend for many days, I guess. It is useful for rice crop but at the same time a trouble for the muddy houses.

I take sips of the coffee and see the natural beauty of the mountains around. A mesmerizing flow of green mountains is there in an ascending order. All can be seen taking baths in the water coming from the heavens where angels are taking baths and pouring water down. I recall *Hazrat Imam Bari Sarkar's* predictions many hundred years ago about the creation of Pakistan and establishment of a beautiful city in the lap of *Marghallah Hills*. Saints have some inner or metaphysical powers perhaps, I think, and even many times I believe so. I also recall my days at *NUML University Islamabad* during my diploma in English Language some years ago. That was the first time I had a chance to live away from my home. Hostel life had its own charms and harms. Most of my free time used to be spent in the central library where the librarian was so generous. He allowed me to have the books copies from the corner that was exclusive for the faculty members. Those days, I had a passion for reading literature on colonialism. I got many valuable books copied in those days. The canteen of the university used to be a special attraction, with all category of students, boys and girls, together. I still remember my first exposure to the automatic tea-maker. It was quite strange for me that ready-made hot milk is poured into disposable cups with a packet of tea-sachet with the quantity of sugar at ones disposal. I used to compare it with the tea that *SugraN apa* used to make of pure milk. She used to tell me that a good tea is there when it comes to the boiling point three times. All the time she is to be vigilant so that it may not out-pour. That is the real tea, I still believe and can't compare with the tea made from the milk of *iron-buffalo;* a name I coined for the automatic tea maker in those days. My friends always laughed and

giggled at when I asked them to go to the canteen and take a cup of tea from *iron-buffalo.*

The coffee from the same *iron-buffalo* is finished. I move to a chair from where a big flat TV screen is visible on the front wall. Rain has gone heavier making a sort of curtain between my eyes and the objects even at ten feet away. The cars in the parking lot are not visible any more. There is a great crowd out side the canteen taking snacks and tea. Kids are running and getting slipped on the clean slippery tiles of the floor. A family of ten people on the right side of mine is there with flower petals and garlands of fresh roses. From their conversation I gather that their grandfather and grandmother are coming from Saudi Arabia after performing *Umera*.

Geo News is on air. There are commercials of mobile phone and cheap air tickets. News tickers are also streaming in the bottom from right to left. It is 10:30 am when all of a sudden an alarm starts to resound, and on the T.V screen an announcer appears with a breaking news.

Air Blue Flight 202 has crashed in the Marghalla Hills. Air Aviation Authority and the rescue teams are going to start operations. Within seconds the people in the waiting lounge and even those outside the canteen rush towards the TV screen. They all start wailing and crying. Just two minutes later the same announcer appears and advises the people to be patient and pray as the rescue teams are quite near to the place of crash. She also tells that the plane has crashed in a ditch where the approach through land may take some time. Some flashes of the spot also start appearing on the screen with dust and smoke, rain and flames; nothing is clearly visible.

I am unable to stand. Everything gets darkened for me. I take the support of a pillar with eyes fixed on the screen. I look back at the info dashboard. There is green light for the *Air Blue 202* is still flickering. The is a great panic around. Phone calls, cries, sighs. It appears as a doomsday. Next announcement: *the rescue teams have searched the plane. Operation for rescue is going on*. Next announcement after 15 minutes: *about 100 out of 146 passenger have been reported expired, some seriously injured, others have minor injuries*. I am fixed at the place; unable to move or to utter a single sound. I try to muster up my senses and dial the number of *Fareed Ali.* He abruptly speaks, "Dear! Don't worry, be brave, be bold, I am reaching you. Just keep your phone on."

There are cries and sighs all around, but my tears are dropping inside me perhaps that are chocking my passage of sigh. I can not sigh. I can not weep. I can not move. Rain has become more heavy and constant. Time stops. I don't know for how long I remain in this posture. I see *Fareed Ali* standing in front of me with his hands on my shoulders. He is all soaked. He tries to make me stand upright. I just feel he is embracing me in a circle of one arm around my waist and dragging me to an emergency room there. Then all is dark.

I am in my bedroom when I open my eyes. How he shifted me to my home, I don't know. There are only flames and rain dancing before my eyes. My eyes get fixed; unable to wink, unable to move. All of a sudden, I am in a desert; vast and barren. All filled with parching sun. No water, no shade around. Jennica and I standing quite nigh, but faces to opposite sides. Both are soaked in sweat. Both haggard and gasping as coming from a long fruitless venture. The sound of my gasping is audible to her, I believe. She too is with the same breathing. Both mum. Both don't wish to

show faces to each other. Vultures are cruising in abundance. They need a prey; a fresh carcass. They seem eyeing on us. But we are not dead yet. We are breathing. They have no haste too. They can wait. After some hours the evening shadows will start looming on the horizon paving way for a dark night. I close my eyes and feel the darkness of the night, with no one to see no one. A blanket of darkness, a coverlet of visions, a cruise of vultures. All illusions.

A soft touch of fingers on my forehead makes me realize that I am alive. It is *Fareed Ali* who is sitting on the head-side of my bed. All silent. I look for a moment at him. He has his eyes red and hair spread on his forehead. He gives me support, makes me sit, and puts a glass of semi hot milk on my lips. I can take just one gulp and no more. It is citric, I feel. On the side table I see some medicine; may be for me. *SugraN apa* is rushing here and there bringing something or the other, also reciting some words and blowing on me. She wants to know something from *Fareed Ali* but he is ignoring her queries. She has apprehension that we met some road accident or *decoity.* She asks hesitantly to *Fareed Ali* about the mishap or anything else. He is sitting with bowed head, least able to respond her. He just consoles her by saying that *Allah* does better. He has his secrets which we are unable to understand, and *Allah* is the saviour and destroyer of our lives. She nods and gets a little bit satisfaction. In my mind only two words were appearing and vanishing

…….life in illusions…….

…….illusions in life…….

****

The moments I bid farewell
were sudden and small
like the fall of yellow leaves
Falling from the tall trees
In the mid of the autumn.
Your eyes transfixed in me
with a clamor behind them
Like a storm in a teacup.
I was not slick inside too.
I'd queries and questions
About the moments we lived
The days and nights we spent
The gifts we exchanged.
I said so many words
without any syllables
Sighs were unuttered
Drops were unshed
throat got chocked
Eyes fixed like a desert.
I was curious
And hoped for spring
But that was just a hope
Leaves once fallen

Can't be patched back

On the same boughs.

Thousands of showers

And streams of spring

If all work together

Can never reunite me

With my dear Jennica.

****

Airblue Flight 202

Source: (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Airblue Flight 202 was a scheduled Pakistani domestic passenger flight from the country's largest city Karachi to the capital city of Islamabad. On 28 July 2010, the Airbus A321-231 jet airliner serving the flight crashed into the *Margalla Hills*, north of Islamabad, while approaching *Benazir Bhutto International Airport*. All 146 passengers and 6 crew members on board were killed. It is the deadliest air accident to occur in Pakistan to date and the first fatal crash involving an Airbus A321.

Pakistan's Civil Aviation Authority concluded that the crash was caused by the captain's incorrect flight-control input. The captain's arrogant demeanour during the entire flight caused the first officer to lose his self-esteem, making him less likely to challenge the captain's mistakes and effectively ceased any meaningful crew resource management due to the toxic work environment.

The aircraft wreckage was found near the Daman-e-Koh viewing point in the *Margalla Hills* outside Islamabad. The Los Angeles Times reported that television footage of the crash site showed smoke and burning debris strewn in a swath cutting through the forest. Rescue helicopters hovered overhead. Fire was visible, and smoke was blowing up from the scene.

The rescue operation was reported to be "chaotic". BBC Urdu reported that majority of those on the crash site were members from Pakistan's antiterrorism police, while only a few people were from search and rescue. Most were just "standing around, gazing at the burning debris" with nothing much to do. Their search-and-rescue operation was also hampered by the lack of coordination between rescuers and other government institutions, such as the military, the police, and the Capital Development Authority.

Flight 202 was carrying **146 passengers** and **six crew members.** Of the passengers, 110 were men, 29 were women, five were children, and two were infants. Among the passengers were an active-duty captain of the Pakistan Army, six members of the Youth Parliament of Pakistan, and three off-duty flight attendants. The majority of the passengers were Pakistani. There were at least four foreign nationals. According to reports, one Somali diplomat, one Austrian, and **two Americans** were on board Flight 202.

****

MEET THE AUTHOR

M.R. Gohar (Dr. Muhammad Riaz Gohar) is the author of the books ‘Inside Out', 'Images', 'Metaphors', 'Yellow Leaves' and 'My Vigils' (all having short and long poems in English). His 'Kasak' is a book with Urdu poems. 'Life in Illusions' is his debut novel or novelette. M.R.Gohar is an Associate Professor of English at Government Graduate College Satellite Town Gujranwala. He grew up in Jandiala Baghwala, a peripheral village of Gujranwala. He received his Bachelor in English Literature and Masters in English Literature with Gold Medal from Government College Gujranwala. Apart from English Literature, he got his Masters degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) from Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. He got his Master degrees in Urdu, Punjabi and MOL Master in Oriental Learning) from the University of Punjab Lahore. He secured his degrees of M. Phil and Ph.D in Linguistics from the University of Gujrat. His areas of research are morphology and onomastics. In addition to writing poetry and novel, he has his research articles published on native languages that can be found on google scholar (as Dr. Muhammad Riaz Gohar). He is the Chief-Patron of a research organization "Orient Social Research Consultancy (www.osrc.org.pk) that hosts five HEC recognized journals in 'Y' category.

ISBN: 978-969-2281-04-1